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SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 5th MEETING

Chairman: Mr. MAPURANGA (Zimbabwe)

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The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

AGENDA ITEM 18: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECLARATION ON THE GRANTING OF INDEPENDENCE TO COLONIAL COUNTRIES AND PEOPLES (Territories not covered under other agenda items) (continued)

Hearing of representatives of Non-Self-Governing Territories and of petitioners

Question of the United States Virgin Islands (A/C.4/52/5)

1. At the invitation of the Chairman, Mr. Corbin (United States Virgin Islands) took a place at the table.

2. Mr. CORBIN (United States Virgin Islands) said that his Government welcomed the omnibus resolution on the 12 small Territories adopted by the Special Committee on decolonization (A/52/23 (Part VI, para. 20)) and was especially pleased that the text had been updated to reflect new developments in the United States Virgin Islands, including the question of the transfer of the fourth largest island from the jurisdiction of the administering Power to the people of the Territory. It also referred to his Government's long-standing interest in associate membership in several regional organizations, including the Caribbean Community, the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States and the Association of Caribbean States.

3. Paragraph 2 of section A of the omnibus resolution referred to the right to self-determination in conformity with legitimate political status options, including those defined in General Assembly resolution 1541 (XV). Since it was being argued that that wording implied that other political options might be seen as having met the test of sufficient self-government, his Government felt bound to assert that the principles defined in General Assembly resolution 1541 (XV) must continue to apply for the remaining Territories despite their small size. None of the Territories currently met the standard for integration or free association set forth in General Assembly resolution 1541 (XV). The United Nations had consistently recognized that any political status must accommodate the basic principles of equality in question before it could be regarded as full self-government. None of the current dependency arrangements met that test of equality. The fact that the remaining small island Territories had not expressed a preference for immediate independence did not mean that their current arrangement was, by definition, self-governing.

4. A number of dependency models had been proposed in recent years as alternatives to full self-government; they had all been rejected by the representatives of the people of the small island Territories at the Caribbean and Pacific regional seminars of the Special Committee because they did not meet the test of basic equality in accordance with General Assembly resolution 1541 (XV). The Fourth Committee should bear in mind in its deliberations that the current dependency arrangements did not provide sufficient autonomy or equality for the removal of those Territories from the United Nations list.

5. Regional seminars represented the most successful activity undertaken by the Special Committee, and the only activity of the Plan of Action of the International Decade for the Eradication of Colonialism which was being implemented. The seminars were the only opportunity for most of the Territories to interact with the United Nations and better understand the role of the international community in their development process, and for United Nations Member States to hear first-hand from representatives of the elected Governments and non-governmental organizations of those Territories about the issues faced in their development process. Many of the issues before the Committee had been addressed by the Territories themselves in those seminars.

6. At the Caribbean Regional Seminar, his Government had presented a plan of action for self-determination, derived from the conclusions of the six seminars held since 1990. The issues addressed included the need for direct and closer participation of the Territories in the United Nations system through observer status, and their inclusion in United Nations technical programmes, especially those dealing with island developing countries and natural disaster reduction. The seminar had reaffirmed the validity of all available options for self-determination as long as they were in accordance with the freely expressed wishes of the peoples concerned and in conformity with the principles contained in General Assembly resolutions 1514 (XV) and 1541 (XV). The report of the seminar (A/AC.109/2089) reaffirmed many of the previous recommendations made by regional seminars. The statement by the representatives of the democratically elected Governments of the Non-Self-Governing Territories, appended to the report, was of particular interest.

7. The issue of "good governance" was essential to the attainment of greater autonomy and devolution of power from the administering Power to the Territory, leading to full internal self-government. A component on governance should therefore be incorporated into the international agenda. The Committee might wish to request the United Nations Development Programme to address the issue within the framework of its technical assistance programmes in the Non-Self-Governing Territories. In the case of the small island Territories, the issue of governance was related, not to the successful conduct of general elections, but rather to devolution of power to the elected Government and ultimate constitutional advancement. His Government strongly advocated that a resolution on emergency assistance to Montserrat should be introduced and that a meeting of relevant United Nations bodies and the international community should be convened to work with regional institutions to help the Government of Montserrat.

8. Mr. Corbin withdrew.

Question of Gibraltar

9. The CHAIRMAN said that, in accordance with established procedure, he took it that the Committee agreed to invite the Chief Minister of Gibraltar to make a statement.

10. It was so decided.

11. At the invitation of the Chairman, Mr. Caruana (Chief Minister of Gibraltar) took a place at the table.

12. Mr. CARUANA (Chief Minister of Gibraltar) said that the people of Gibraltar asserted their inalienable right to self-determination and refuted Spain's claim to Gibraltar. The people of Gibraltar had a long tradition of democracy and self-government. They rejected the aspirations of those who, even from within the European Union, failed to accept democratic principles in the case of Gibraltar. Gibraltar was recognized by the United Nations as a Non-Self-Governing Territory. Under the Charter of the United Nations and international law, the principle of self-determination was applicable to all Non-Self-Governing Territories; there could be no exceptions to that doctrine.

13. Gibraltar had been ceded by Spain in perpetuity under the Treaty of Utrecht. The people of Gibraltar had established their identity and rights over an uninterrupted period of 293 years. The situation was no different from that of many of the foremost countries of the world whose people had exercised their right to self-determination. There was no basis in United Nations doctrine, international law or democratic principles for Spain's assertion that the people of Gibraltar were not entitled to the right to self-determination. Gibraltar, as a Non-Self-Governing Territory, could be decolonized only through a process of self-determination, not by territorial retrocession or any other process.

14. International law clearly stipulated that there could be no exceptions to the right of self-determination. The International Court of Justice had made it clear, in relation to Namibia and Western Sahara, that the principle of self-determination applied to all Non-Self-Governing Territories. It had also established that the existence of a territorial claim could not displace the right to self-determination. Under the International Covenants on Human Rights, which had been specifically extended to Gibraltar in 1976, without objection from Spain, all peoples had the right to self-determination, and the obligation to respect that right was imposed not just on administering Powers but on all Member States, Spain included. Spain had expressed its willingness to respect the legitimate rights of the inhabitants of Gibraltar, but those rights included, above all, the right of self-determination.

15. Gibraltar was not part of Spain. Spain invoked the principle that there could be no partial or total disruption of the territorial integrity and political unity of a sovereign State, basing its contention on a grave misrepresentation of paragraph 6 of General Assembly resolution 1415 (XV). It was obvious that that paragraph meant that the principle of self-determination could not be used by the people of an existing Territory to secede from it. That was not the case with Gibraltar because Gibraltar was not part of Spain; it had ceased to be Spanish in 1704. The history of the world could not be rewritten so as to deny modern human rights.

16. Gibraltar could make an important contribution in mutual cooperation to the economic and social well-being of all the peoples in the region. The people of Gibraltar were proud of their plural ethnic and cultural heritage and of their efforts to sustain self-sufficiency through trade and tourism. Gibraltar was self-governing and politically mature, and it must move onwards.

17. Gibraltar welcomed the announcement by the Government of the United Kingdom that it would undertake a comprehensive review of policy in relation to its remaining Non-Self-Governing Territories. His Government would shortly submit proposals to the United Kingdom Government with a view to giving the people of Gibraltar further autonomy in the conduct of their affairs. Under those proposals, Gibraltar would remain in a close political and constitutional relationship with the United Kingdom but its status, if accepted by the people, would amount to a non-colonial relationship and an effective and valid exercise of self-determination under the terms of the fourth option set out in General Assembly resolution 2625 (XXV). At the same time, Gibraltar sought a friendly coexistence with Spain and a dignified process of dialogue to achieve it.

18. Any talks about Gibraltar must include the elected representatives of the people of Gibraltar as a principal participant in their own right; nothing could be agreed on without their consent. There could be no progress in resolving the differences with Spain if Spain continued to insist that the matter must be resolved bilaterally between the United Kingdom and Spain. Gibraltar was encouraged by the conclusions reached at the Papua New Guinea and Antigua regional seminars that there could be no dialogue over the future of any Non-Self-Governing Territory without the active and direct involvement of the people of that Territory. It hoped that the Committee would uphold its rights as enshrined in the Charter.

19. Mr. Caruana withdrew.

Question of Western Sahara (A/C.4/52/4 and Add.1-4)

20. At the invitation of the Chairman, Mr. Lecoq (representing a number of elected French officials) took a seat at the petitioners' table.

21. Mr. ZAHID (Morocco), speaking on a point of order, said that in a letter addressed to the Chairman of the Committee (A/C.4/52/4) Mr. Lecoq had asked to make a statement on behalf of a number of French elected officials. It had been reported in the Moroccan press that morning that the alleged request for a hearing was an individual initiative by Mr. Lecoq, and that most of the signatures on the letter, notably those of Mr. Batteux and Mr. Le Garrec, had been forged.

22. The CHAIRMAN said that the letter he had received included all the signatures; he had not received any disclaimer. The Committee might not wish to lend credence to media reports on the matter. If there was no objection, he would request Mr. Lecoq to proceed.

23. Mr. LECOQ, speaking on behalf of the elected French officials listed in document A/C.4/52/4, said that the question of Western Sahara was of particular concern to him because Gonfreville l'Orcher, of which he was Mayor, was twinned with J'Réfia, a Saharan community currently housed in one of the camps in Tindouf, and there had been many exchanges between the two communities, strengthening his conviction and that of his fellow citizens that the rights of the Saharan people must be defended.

24. The most recent peace plan and the identification work undertaken by the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) had raised firm hopes for a just and lasting peace but he had serious reservations concerning the impartiality of the United Nations and even its ability to bring about peace. The appointment of Mr. James Baker, a man of considerable personal authority and a highly developed sense of responsibility, as the Secretary-General's Personal Envoy, had led to real progress in only a few weeks, after many years of impasse. The parties to the conflict - the Frente POLISARIO and Morocco - and the observer countries - Algeria and Mauritania - had cooperated constructively to conclude the Houston agreements. Such goodwill must continue during application of those agreements. The Security Council's decision to extend the mandate of MINURSO, dispatch a technical mission and prepare for a referendum were proof of the international community's interest in the region.

25. It was the intention of the elected French officials on whose behalf he spoke to continue to monitor the situation closely, and he expressed the hope some of them would be allowed to visit both the Moroccan and the Frente POLISARIO zones. He trusted that the United Nations would have the necessary authority and resources to carry out its mission, complete the identification process, monitor borders and ensure equal access to the media and to campaign resources. Freedom of speech and movement as set out in the Houston agreements must be guaranteed by independent international observers and the international press.

26. The twenty-third European conference on coordinating support for the Saharan people, and the meeting of European cities twinned with Saharan cities would be the first steps in mobilizing support in his country for the rights of the people of Western Sahara.

27. Mr. ZAHID (Morocco) said that his country had participated willingly in negotiations for the peace plan and for the Houston agreements and asked whether the previous speaker had read those agreements before coming to address the Committee.

28. Mr. LECOQ replied that he had indeed read the agreements and noted that during his statement he had congratulated Morocco for its goodwill and positive attitude and had only questioned whether the United Nations would have the necessary resources to implement the peace plan successfully.

29. Mr. ZAHID (Morocco) observed that it was Morocco which had initiated the idea of a referendum.

30. Mr. Lecoq withdrew.

31. At the invitation of the Chairman, Mr. Briones (Federación Estatal de Instituciones Solidarias con el Pueblo Saharaui) took a place at the petitioners' table.

32. Mr. BRIONES (Federación Estatal de Instituciones Solidarias con el Pueblo Saharaui) said that representatives of Spanish assistance and solidarity organizations, meeting recently in the Saharan camps with an adviser of the Secretary-General's Personal Envoy, Mr. James Baker, had stressed that those

living in Western Sahara, as well as their families in the occupied zones, belonged to the same Saharan people as had been living in Spanish Sahara at the end of the Spanish colonial administration in 1975. They were the true Saharans. He defended the Spanish census of 1974, which had counted the people actually living within the territory without attempting to define who could be considered to be Saharan or taking into account the diaspora, which was in large part a result of the creation of artificial borders in Africa.

33. He questioned Morocco's claim to the Territory and cited the 1975 decision by the International Court of Justice in support of his position. The so-called Green March had simply been a Moroccan pretext for military occupation and, given the unique political situation in Spain at that time, the Madrid Agreement could not be considered legitimate. The Spanish Parliament itself had repudiated that Agreement and authorized the Government to proceed to a referendum. Following the Mauritania-Sahara peace agreement, Morocco had invaded the southern region of Western Sahara, acting as if that region were an integral part of Morocco.

34. After 500 years of involvement in Western Sahara, all Spaniards believed in that region's right to choose to become independent or to remain Spanish. The appointment of Mr. James Baker as the Secretary-General's Personal Envoy had led to genuine progress in negotiations for the holding of a referendum, thanks to the recognition of the basic principle of the peace plan, namely that the organization and monitoring of a free and democratic referendum was the responsibility of the United Nations. MINURSO must have the resources necessary to counterbalance the long years of Moroccan repression of the Western Saharan people, who alone had the right to vote. The Moroccan police force must be replaced by a citizen police force in order to ensure a free referendum. In carrying out its mandate, MINURSO must act with sensitivity and prudence.

35. He wondered what the legal status of Western Sahara would be during the transition period and expressed the hope that MINURSO would permit access to the press and observers, instead of allowing Moroccan repression to continue unabated until the referendum campaign. MINURSO must act to ensure that the referendum, so critical not only for Western Sahara and the entire region, but also for the prestige of the United Nations and international solidarity, was not a farce.

36. Mr. ZAHID (Morocco) expressed indignation at some of the statements by the previous speaker. He pointed out that the International Court of Justice had itself recognized links of allegiance between Morocco and Western Sahara. Morocco had criticized the 1974 census because it had counted only those persons living in Western Sahara, without taking into account the Saharans who had fled to Morocco; that was why his Government had approved the rules for the referendum which permitted all Western Saharans, including those in Morocco, to make themselves known to the Identification Commission. Referring to the impasse in negotiations, he suggested that the major obstacle in that process had been the refusal by the Frente POLISARIO to participate and, as for the question of human rights, he pointed out that many people had fled the camps in the Tindouf area to escape to Morocco. Concerning the transition period, he pointed out that the Settlement Plan had been accepted by all the parties and approved by the Security Council.

37. Mr. BRIONES (Federación Estatal de Instituciones Solidarias con el Pueblo Saharaui) replied that recognition of historical links with Western Sahara by the International Court of Justice did not imply sovereignty and that the Spanish census of 1974 had been carried out in accordance with Spanish law and international practice concerning referendums on self-determination. He stressed Spain's long involvement in the region and the relatively recent immigration from Morocco and Mauritania into Western Sahara. He also referred the Committee to the relevant reports by international human rights organizations.

38. Mr. ZAHID (Morocco) stressed that the 1974 census had not taken into account the ethnic Saharans who had fled to Morocco and also pointed out that the speaker had not answered his question concerning human rights abuses in Tindouf.

39. Mr. Briones withdrew.

40. At the invitation of the Chairman, Mr. Ahmed (Frente POLISARIO) took a place at the petitioners' table.

41. Mr. AHMED (Frente POLISARIO) stated that there was new hope for a just outcome in Western Sahara, owing in large part to the renewed interest of the United Nations and the appointment of Mr. James Baker as the Personal Envoy of the Secretary-General. He regretted that the 85 Moroccan prisoners of war released as a gesture of goodwill during Mr. Baker's visit to the region had not yet been able to return home.

42. After meeting with the parties concerned, Mr. Baker had concluded that direct talks were the only way of breaking the deadlock in the peace process. As a result of the goodwill and cooperation shown during those direct high-level talks, the Frente POLISARIO and the Kingdom of Morocco had reached agreements capable of overcoming the problems that had thus far prevented implementation of the peace plan or might do so in the future. In the light of that substantial progress, the Secretary-General stated in paragraph 32 of his report (S/1997/742) that he expected to be able to provide a detailed plan, timetable and budget for the holding of a referendum and the fulfilment of United Nations objectives in Western Sahara, by November 1997.

43. There was therefore every hope that a real and just peace in Western Sahara, based on the respect of international legality, could be attained. History and the case of Western Sahara demonstrated that a peace which went against the principle of a people's right to self-determination was not a just peace nor could it be a lasting one.

44. The Secretary-General and his Personal Envoy, and the two parties as well, were to be congratulated on the spirit of cooperation that had broken the previous deadlock and revived progress on the referendum. The Fourth Committee and the Special Committee, which had so long worked towards that goal, should feel encouraged that tangible results might finally be at hand. Given past experience, however, the United Nations, in cooperation with the Organization of African Unity (OAU), should lead the process towards a fully credible referendum, without letting either of the parties dictate the terms. The new

dynamic thus created would lead inexorably to the Saharans' peaceful exercise of their fundamental rights to freedom and dignity after suffering a long and cruel colonial war.

45. Mr. Ahmed withdrew.

46. At the invitation of the Chairman, Ms. Smith de Cherif (Sahara Fund) took a place a the petitioners' table.

47. Ms. SMITH DE CHERIF (Sahara Fund) said that, in the case of Western Sahara, important principles of international law had been contravened, including respect for boundaries inherited from the colonial period, the right of a nation not to be annexed against its will, and the primacy of a people's right to self-determination over the nebulous claims of historic title. Now, thanks to imaginative mediation, cooperation between the two parties involved and encouragement from the two neighbouring countries of Algeria and Mauritania, there was agreement on all issues that had thus far inhibited the implementation of the settlement plan and a United Nations-sponsored referendum on self-determination.

48. The referendum would be valid only if conducted in a free and fair manner. The pre-electoral preparations, involving the identification of the electorate, the maintenance of the current demographics altered only by the repatriation of refugees, and the creation of a political climate allowing the Saharans to make an informed choice between integration with Morocco or independence, would be important indicators of the validity of the referendum process.

49. To create the proper conditions for a plebiscite, Saharan residents and returnees must receive a guarantee from the United Nations that their human rights would be observed; Moroccan law, and especially its emergency legislation, must be suspended within Western Sahara; the one-party total control of essential services must end; proponents of both political options must have equal access to the media without fear of reprisal, so that a free and open campaign could take place; the Acting Special Representative must have the authority to stop the referendum process if conditions so warranted; and United Nations monitoring of the referendum must be supplemented by that of independent neutral observers. Lastly, the United Nations must remain vigilant in order to prevent the process from being sabotaged and to ensure that justice prevailed.

50. Ms. Smith de Cherif withdrew.

ORGANIZATION OF WORK

51. The CHAIRMAN, after drawing attention to draft resolution A/C.4/52/L.4 concerning the proposed administrative changes in the decolonization programme, informed the Committee that the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services and the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs would now address it concerning those proposed changes.

52. Mr. JIN Yongjian (Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services) said that, in order to allay concerns within the Committee, he would outline the series of events that had led to the administrative

placement of the decolonization team within his own new Department. He recalled that the Secretary-General had on 17 March 1997 announced the first of the managerial initiatives that he was able to take under his own authority as track one of the Organization's reform, which included the consolidation of several departments and the streamlining, improvement and strengthening of technical support for the intergovernmental bodies, in order to improve the coherence, quality and efficiency of services. Among those initiatives had been the decision to create the new Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services, to which the previous General Assembly Affairs Division of the Department of Political Affairs, including the Division's subsidiary entities like the decolonization team, would be transferred.

53. The Chairman of the Special Committee on decolonization had in May 1997 expressed concern to the Secretary-General that the proposed transfer was an attempt to diminish the political essence of the Special Committee's mandate. In his response of 11 July 1997, the Secretary-General had reiterated his conclusion that it would be in the best interests of efficiency for the decolonization team to be moved with its parent body to the new Department, at the same time assuring the Chairman of the Special Committee that he would see to it that the Department of Political Affairs and the new Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services would collaborate closely on all matters pertaining to the important question of decolonization, particularly in the preparation of substantive reports. In response to a further letter from the Chairman of the Special Committee, the Secretary-General had in his letter of 18 September 1997 clarified that his decision had been motivated primarily by the wish to improve the efficiency of Secretariat support for the Special Committee and give a higher profile to that support; at the same time he had assured the Chairman that despite some departures from past practice, the highest standards of services would be maintained for intergovernmental and expert bodies.

54. Some of the concerns expressed in the Fourth Committee might be the result of misunderstandings. For instance, the mandate of the Special Committee - given it by decision of the Member States - could in no way be affected by the purely administrative changes in question. Furthermore, the political significance of the Special Committee's work, to which the Secretary-General was wholeheartedly committed, would not be diminished. There would be very close liaison between the Department of Political Affairs and his own Department on any matters pertaining to decolonization, particularly substantive matters; and there would be close cooperation between the appropriate regional divisions of the Department of Political Affairs and the decolonization team. In his own new Department he had created a Disarmament and Decolonization Organs Servicing Branch, an arrangement which not only had freed the senior staff of the decolonization team to devote even more time to the important work of the Special Committee and the challenges of the International Decade for the Eradication of Colonialism, but also had made a wider range of servicing staff available to the Special Committee. Furthermore, the budgetary allocations to the Special Committee would remain unchanged.

55. It should be noted that the Fourth Committee, which dealt with special political as well as decolonization items, could not be considered an extension of the Special Committee. The appointment to the Fourth Committee of a very

experienced Secretary knowledgeable in disarmament and First Committee affairs had enhanced the Committee's functioning and allowed the senior staff of the decolonization team to devote more time to preparing balanced and well-researched working papers for the Special Committee.

56. Members of the Committee were of course aware that the Secretary-General's reform proposals, including the transfer of the decolonization team, were currently being considered in open-ended informal consultations in the plenary Assembly.

57. Mr. PRENDERGAST (Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs) said that a distinction had to be made between the policy aspect of the work done in the Fourth Committee and the Special Committee and the separate question of the servicing of the two committees. The substantive foreign policy work of both committees, including policy analyses, briefs and proposals on decolonization issues, would continue to be carried out in his Department, with absolutely no change.

58. The Committee should bear in mind that the Secretary-General's decision to transfer the "decolonization unit", namely, those elements of the former General Assembly Subsidiary Organs Branch that related to the work of the Fourth Committee and the Special Committee, together with its parent body, the former General Assembly Affairs Division, to the new Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services actually affected only three Professional and three General Service staff. The practical effects of reversing the Secretary-General's decision would be to cut off those six staff members from the rest of the General Assembly Affairs Division by locating them in a different Department, the Department of Political Affairs, thus depriving them of the Division's resources and support in servicing the Committee. The Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services had created a Disarmament and Decolonization Organs Servicing Branch precisely to provide better service to the Special Committee. Members of the Fourth Committee might also like to ask themselves where in the Department of Political Affairs that tiny unit would be located: it was much too small to form a self-standing unit, and it could not be attached to one of the regional divisions because of the range of issues with which it dealt.

59. As to the analogy with the Palestinian Rights Division, there were three fundamental differences: first, that Division was considerably larger, consisting of nine Professional and six General Service staff; secondly, it dealt with a single issue; and thirdly, although it dealt with both substance and servicing, substantive work accounted for 95 per cent of its time. By contrast, while the Special Committee's substantive work was still being dealt with in the Department of Political Affairs, only the servicing of the Fourth Committee and the Special Committee had been transferred.

60. He failed to understand the logic of the contention that the transfer of that servicing function to the new Department represented a downgrading of the importance attached by the Secretary-General to the continuing work of the Special Committee; any more than the transfer of the General Assembly Affairs Division to the new Department downgraded the work of the General Assembly. The Secretary-General had taken his decision for sound administrative reasons in

order to provide better, not worse, service. The Secretary-General also believed that the decision was within his authority and, as he had cautioned in his programme for reform (A/51/950), there should be a well-defined division of functions between the General Assembly and the Secretary-General, with neither encroaching on the authority of the other.

61. The CHAIRMAN, in response to a suggestion by Mr. OVIA (Papua New Guinea), invited members of the Committee to ask any questions they wished of the Under-Secretaries-General, without, however, entering into a debate on the item.

62. Mr. GAMITO (Portugal) said that his delegation had sponsored draft resolution A/C.4/52/L.4, which urged that the Decolonization Branch and all its functions should be maintained in the Department of Political Affairs. Portugal believed that the proposed transfer was not merely an administrative measure. It seemed to discount the political nature of the decolonization process as such and might lead to a reduction of the funds available for the existing decolonization programmes. Since 75 per cent of the work of the decolonization unit related to substantive political issues of decolonization, Portugal could see no political gains in the transfer. It would also like clarification as to what financial savings, if any, the transfer would produce, and why any reference to the Decolonization Branch had been omitted from annex II of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998-1999 (A/52/303). Furthermore, the timing of the Secretary-General's decision, in the final stages of the International Decade for the Eradication of Colonialism, seemed to send the erroneous message that the United Nations was downgrading its commitment to the completion of decolonization.

63. His delegation and many others were eager to receive assurances that would dispel their misgivings. Support for the Secretary-General's reform proposals in general was not the issue at stake: rather the issue was whether the United Nations recognized the clear political dimension of decolonization.

64. Mr. JIN Yongjian (Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services) reiterated that the decolonization unit had been moved to the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services solely for the sake of enhanced efficiency and flexibility. No diminution of the Special Committee's political significance was implied, and the budgetary resources allocated to the decolonization programme were unchanged.

65. Mr. PRENDERGAST (Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs) added that in contrast to two other units affected by the Secretary-General's track-one reforms, namely the Centre for Disarmament and the Division for Palestinian Rights, the decolonization team was too small either to be viable on its own or to be split up into substantive and servicing components. It had thus been necessary to move it en bloc.

66. Mr. MEKDAD (Syria) said that, while the Secretary-General's reform process as such was sound, the transfer of the decolonization team might be taken to imply some downgrading of the work of the Special Committee. He suggested a return to the status quo ante.

67. Mr. RIDER (New Zealand) noted that the medium-term plan for 1998-2001 had given the Fourth Committee a clear, detailed and integrated mandate from the General Assembly. In contrast, the fragmentation effect of the move of the decolonization team seemed unwieldy and unlikely to yield any real gain in efficiency.

68. Mr. AKBARUDDIN (India) asked why the General Assembly had not been informed of the move of the Decolonization Branch; it had, after all, been the General Assembly that had negotiated the Fourth Committee's mandate in the medium-term plan. He did not see how the proliferation of departments within the Secretariat would contribute to efficiency. Perhaps the idea of centralizing servicing activities was reasonable in itself, but if so it ought to be applied to all the units that reported to the Fourth Committee, such as the Department of Public Information and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, not only the decolonization unit.

69. Mr. JIN Yongjian (Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services) explained that both the substantive and the servicing activities of the decolonization team would continue exactly as before; the division of labour had always been clear. With respect to the medium-term plan, the Secretary-General's proposals for reform would not affect programme activities. The Secretary-General had found it appropriate to incorporate some technical servicing entities into the new Department at the current stage.

70. Mr. PRENDERGAST (Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs) noted that the administrative change in question did not mean that the subprogramme on decolonization was being abandoned; it would still be implemented by the Secretariat.

71. Mr. TANOH-BOUTCHOUÉ (Côte d'Ivoire) pointed out that the Decolonization Branch did not appear anywhere in the organization chart in document A/52/303, which described the changes that would be required to the proposed programme budget in order to implement the proposed reforms. In view of the importance of funding, that was a disquieting omission.

72. Mr. GUARINI (United States of America) said that his delegation was concerned about the impact of the draft resolution on the Organization's reform effort as a whole. Discussions on that matter were currently taking place in the plenary Assembly, and it would be appropriate for the Committee to postpone discussion of the relevant agenda item until after the Assembly had completed its consideration of the proposed reform package.

73. Speaking on a point of order, he asked the Chairman to rule on a question of procedure, namely, whether the Committee was competent to discuss the issue at the present time.

74. The CHAIRMAN said that it was in order for Committee members to continue to ask the two Under-Secretaries-General for information. He suggested that the representative of the United States should raise the issue of competence at a future meeting, once the Committee had begun its consideration of the draft resolution.

75. Ms. RAMIREZ (Argentina) noted that while the move of the decolonization team would allegedly involve no substantive change in its work, it was not clear what benefit would accrue to the work of decolonization as a result. She also asked what criteria had been applied in deciding which units should be relocated: had the number of staff members been the only consideration, or had there been others as well?

76. Mr. GAMITO (Portugal) asked whether the Secretariat still regarded decolonization-related issues as political in nature, despite the transfer of the decolonization unit.

77. Mr. JIN Yongjian (Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services), replying to the question asked by the representative of Côte d'Ivoire, acknowledged that the word "decolonization" did not appear in document A/52/303. He explained that that document had been published early in September, and that the General Assembly Subsidiary Organs Servicing Branch referred to therein had subsequently been renamed the Disarmament and Decolonization Organs Servicing Branch. The assurance of continued funding for decolonization activities was to be found in document ST/SGB/1997/6, section 7.2, paragraph (g).

78. Responding to the questions asked by the representative of Argentina, he emphasized that the Secretary-General's purpose in incorporating technical servicing functions into a single department had been exclusively to achieve greater efficiency and enhance the quality of servicing in the context of his overall reform effort. The point had been explicitly made by the Secretary-General himself in his letter of 17 March to the Chairman of the Committee.

79. Mr. PRENDERGAST (Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs), replying to the question asked by the representative of Portugal, stated that the work of decolonization was indeed still deemed to be political in nature. The relocation of the decolonization unit had been undertaken for straightforward practical reasons of administrative efficiency; there had been no change in policy.

80. Mr. OVIA (Papua New Guinea) speaking on behalf of the sponsors of draft resolution A/C.4/52/L.4, said that the sponsors wanted the Fourth Committee to take up the draft resolution at the next meeting. He also informed the Committee that Bolivia, Iraq, Namibia, New Zealand and the United Republic of Tanzania had joined the sponsors of the draft resolution.

81. Mr. GAMITO (Portugal), after thanking the two Under-Secretaries-General for their explanations, said that there was room for greater certainty that the decolonization programme would not be politically undermined or underfunded. He suggested that the Chairman of the Special Committee and the sponsors of the draft resolution should meet with the Secretary-General in person in order to convey the Committee's concerns to him and to obtain his assurance that the relocation of the decolonization unit would not affect the functioning of the decolonization programmes. In the meantime, consideration of the draft resolution should be deferred.

82. Ms. BACKES (Luxembourg), speaking on behalf of the members of the European Union, and supported by Mr. CHICHERBAK (Russian Federation), endorsed the suggestion made by the representative of Portugal to the effect that consideration of the draft resolution should be postponed. Committee members would require time to study the text in depth, especially in the light of the additional information provided by the Under-Secretaries-General. There was no urgency about bringing it to a vote; haste would be undesirable and counter-productive.

83. The CHAIRMAN informed the Committee that at a meeting earlier that day, the Bureau had decided that all proposals relating to item 18 - which would include draft resolution A/C.4/52/L.4 - should be taken up at the end of the month, in order to allow time for consultations among delegations and with Governments. He said that the Committee would, accordingly, so proceed.

84. Mr. CHICHERBAK (Russian Federation) said that he supported the Chairman's ruling.

85. Mr. DUMITRIU (Romania) said that he too supported the Chairman's ruling. In particular, deferral of the consideration, if any, of draft resolution A/C.4/52/L.4 would give members time to ponder the issue of competence raised by the United States.

The meeting rose at 6.25 p.m.